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ABSTRACT

Although there is no one best way to teach writing, the creation of a learning climate in which students have the least possible chance for failure will facilitate the learning process. Factors influencing success include student interest in the subject, specifically understood objectives and criteria, genuineness of the teacher, progression from simple to complex tasks, demonstration and modeling of examples, meaningful and purposeful practice, reinforcement and immediate knowledge of results, and active involvement of the learner. Application of these learning factors in the "spiral method," in which the student progresses through a step-by-step process closely aligned with a hierarchy of educational objectives, results in greater participation and skill attainment. An example of this teaching method is outlined for the writing of a business collection letter. (KS)

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TEACHING BUSINESS WRITING BY THE SPIRAL METHOD

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TEACHING BUSINESS WRITING BY THE SPIRAL METHOD

Introduction

Is there one best way to teach effective business writing? A host of different ideas have been researched in an attempt to discover the most important factors related to effective writing instruction. A few of these are:

--the effect of class size on writing improvement

--the use of programmed materials in teaching business writing

--the effect of reading vs. writing on learning to write

--the impact of intelligence on writing achievement

--the correlation between knowledge of functional grammar and the ability to write

--the effectiveness of sentence diagramming as a learning device in writing classes

--the correlation between writing pretests and terminal achievement

--the impact of writing frequency on writing achievement

--the effectiveness of detailed vs. general criticism on students' writing

--the effectiveness of writing without attention given to writing quality

--the impact of weekly multiple-choice testing on students' writing improvement.

The results of these and other research studies dealing with writing effectiveness have generally been inconclusive or have shown the familiar "no significant difference."

Perhaps teachers have been overly critical and unrealistic in criticizing the written work of students. Have teachers judged the

written work of students as being unacceptable when, in fact, it is acceptable in the business world? The response to this question is a resounding "no." In general, businesses and governmental agencies are highly dissatisfied with the communication skills of high school and college graduates.

An article in the education section of the December 8, 1975, issue of Newsweek depicted the inability of our nation's youth to express themselves through writing. This six-page article, entitled "Why Johnny Can't Write," indicated that National Assessment of Educational Progress has found "the essays of 13- and 17-year-olds to be far more awkward, incoherent, and disorganized than the efforts of those tested in 1969." The article stated that "the cries of dismay sound even louder in the halls of commerce, industry and the professions, where writing is the basis for almost all formal business communication."

Those consulted in the creation of this article indicated that the "simplistic spoken style of television" is having a devastating effect on students' ability to write. Whereas the marvel of television was once lauded as a breakthrough in mass education, the TV is now being blamed for the greatest decline in writing ability that we have ever known. E. B. White, essayist emeritus of The New Yorker stated: "Short of throwing away all the television sets, I really don't know what we can do about writing."

Instead of seeing improvement in the written work of students, we are seeing a decline. Thus, our job is becoming more difficult rather than more easy.

Factors Affecting Learning

In view of all these discouraging facts, one can conclude that there is not one best way to teach writing. Perhaps the best approach

to teaching business writing is to create the most ideal learning climate possible, a climate in which students have the least possible chance for failure. To create such an environment, it is possible to identify a number of factors that have proven to have an impact on learning. Although the following list is certainly not all-inclusive, it can be a good working base.

1. Student interest in the subject being studied. This first factor is one that teachers of business writing face constantly. For some reason business writing just doesn't seem to attract the interest that competitive football and baseball do. An informal survey was conducted recently of students enrolled in business report writing at Brigham Young University to determine the degree of enthusiasm these students held for English and writing in their high school years. In the questionnaire the students also ranked their interest in other subjects such as mathematics, physical education, social studies, music, art, etc. A ranking of "1" was highest, and the students ranked an average of eight subject areas. Of the 59 students surveyed, only one gave English and writing a "1" ranking. The average ranking given to this topic area was 5.15. If this survey is representative of all students in business writing classes, it appears that most of the interest in business writing must be sparked by the teacher.

In some way the students need to be convinced that a great amount of satisfaction can come from creating a well-written business document. In addition, students also need to understand the importance of writing ability in their success as a business person.

2. Specifically understood objectives and criteria. Early in the instructional period the students need to gain a clear understanding of the ideal terminal achievement level. The use of clearly stated behavioral

objectives, specific course outlines, and writing guidesheets all help to inform and remind students of the direction they are to follow. One of the most frustrating experiences students can have is to be unaware of the standards or criteria for measurement for their written work. Precise and consistent evaluation serves as a continual reminder of the goals for which students should be striving.

3. Genuineness of teacher. It has been stated that "students don't care how much the teacher knows until they know how much the teacher cares." In addition, in interpersonal communications students learn that in a consultative-type relationship, offered help is accepted much more readily if it is perceived as being genuinely given. In other words, help is help only if it is perceived as help. Students usually determine a teacher's sincerity by observing his actions; all "second-mile" teaching efforts let students know of a teacher's desire to assist them in their learning efforts.

4. Progression from simple to complex, from known to unknown. The human brain remembers ideas in the form of mental clusters. Each new bit of input is related to one of the mental clusters already established in the brain. The closer the relationship between the new input and the established mental cluster, the easier the mental digestion of the new idea will be. When completely foreign input is received, the brain is less able to establish proper mental relationships between the new material and the established system. As a result, improper relationships are likely to be established or the new information is rejected. Teachers must make certain that new information to the students is properly and logically tied to their established mental cluster system.

5. Demonstration, modeling, or giving examples. An important part of writing instruction should be the examination and criticism of both good and poor writing, and students should determine what makes the difference between the effective and ineffective writings they examine. This discrimination ability plays a major part in their ability to revise and improve their own writing.

6. Meaningful and purposeful practice. If learning is totally effective, the newly acquired writing behavior will become relatively automatic. This automatization can be achieved only through meaningful practice and repetition of the desired actions. To a greater or lesser degree repetition causes the transfer of knowledge from short-term memory to long-term memory. Since research findings generally suggest limited relationship between knowledge of writing mechanics and writing ability, the focus of a writing program should be on knowledge transfer. Through the process of meaningful, determined practice, the student bridges the gap between rote memorization and competence in using the new learning.

7. Reinforcement and immediate knowledge of results. Human beings act in anticipation of a desired goal. If the goal a person seeks is attained, the goal-directed activity is reinforced. If the anticipated goal is not attained, however, the tendency to engage in similar goal-directed activity in the future is lessened. Although students are motivated and reinforced by many different factors, nearly everyone receives reinforcement from achievement and recognition. A simple comment like "your spelling is much better this time, John" can mean the difference between outright discouragement and a decision to try harder next time.

The academic vice president of a university, a former teacher of English, tells the story of a young student in his class some years ago. The student received from his teacher a hand-back assignment with the usual numerous red-ink comments. After quickly glancing through the paper the student sighed in dismay, "Oh hell, bled to death again." Teachers need to focus on rebuilding as well as on tearing apart.

Immediate knowledge of results is an important source of reinforcement to students, especially if the feedback is positive. Even if the feedback is negative, however, students must have evaluation so they can know whether they are improving in their ability to communicate. And the more immediate the feedback, the better the student will be able to relate the feedback to the original writing effort.

8. Active involvement of the learner. Active involvement of learners is effective in causing more vivid experience and, in turn, better retention. Active student involvement can help to stimulate increased interest that is also critical in the learning process. Learning which results from passive perception can never compete effectively with that coming from active involvement.

Application of Learning Factors

With these eight factors as a base, a solid instructional method can be built that will ensure maximum chance for success in a business writing class. This method, referred to as the spiral method, takes the students through a step-by-step learning process that is closely aligned with the hierarchy of educational objectives suggested by Bloom[1] and others.

To get a realistic picture of how this spiral method is applied, assume that you, a business communication teacher, are ready to teach

students how to write a business collection letter. You would incorporate the following ten steps into your instruction:

Step 1. Give the students an out-of-class introductory reading assignment. In many cases the reading assignment would come from the course textbook. A specially prepared handout could serve the same purpose, however.

Step 2. Administer a short reading quiz. A series of questions testing the students' understanding of the major points discussed in the reading gives the students more motivation to read and gives you a general idea of the students' comprehension. The reading quizzes may be used either for earning class points or simply for students' self-evaluation with no actual class points earned.

Step 3. Lead a class discussion about the concepts tested in the quiz. Disagreement among students about certain quiz answers provides an excellent opportunity for active student interaction.

Step 4. Show examples and non-examples. Either during or right after the quiz discussion, show the students several examples and non-examples of collection letters. During your explanation of the various strengths and weaknesses of these letters, you would again encourage student discussion in an attempt to sharpen their discrimination skills.

Step 5. Assign in-depth evaluation of several letters you have written or collected. This evaluation is usually an out-of-class assignment to be done on an individual basis. To guide the evaluation process, the letter evaluation form shown in Figure 1 is completed for each example by the student. The student rates the letter in each of the four areas shown on the form, and a detailed justification for each rating is required. From the total points received by each letter evaluated, the student can easily rank the several letters from best to worst.

Step 6. Discuss the students' letter evaluations from Step 5. Compare the ratings given the several letters by the students. Have different class members explain the strengths and weaknesses of the letters. Be prepared to add criticisms or compliments of your own if students do not mention all the characteristics you think are important. A transparency of your own evaluation is useful at this point in the process. Feel free to introduce any additional discussion, exercises, or examples that you feel are needed for clarification and learning.

Step 7. Have the students apply their learning by actually writing a letter. The letter problem may come from a communciation book or from your own creation. In their writing the students will attempt to incorporate all those strengths of composition they have read about, discussed, and seen illustrated thus far.

Step 8. Conduct peer evaluation of writings. Using the form illustrated in Figure 1, the students evaluate their peers' writings. To ensure a certain degree of competency in this evaluation process, divide the class members into pairs so that at least two students are working on each evaluation. Each pair then trades its two papers for two papers from another pair. In addition the student evaluators must give detailed justification for their evaluations in each of the areas shown on the form. The abrasive interaction that results when the two students in each pair try to reach agreement on the rating and evaluation is a marvelous learning experience in itself and is the primary purpose of this activity. Following this in-class peer evaluation, the students should look at their own papers to receive immediate feedback.

Step 9. Conduct a teacher evaluation of the students' writing. Evaluate the students' assignments in line with the standards that have

been previously discussed in class. Then, following your evaluation, match the peer evaluation of each paper with your own evaluation of that paper; and grade the peer evaluation on the degree to which it agrees with your own evaluation. Grading the students' peer evaluations puts some real teeth into the peer evaluation process and gives students added reason to be thorough in their evaluations.

Step 10. Return the papers and prescribe any additional exercises you think are needed. Some students may need to repeat one or more steps in the spiral while others will have completed the spiral successfully the first time through.

Analysis of the Spiral Method

The spiral method of teaching business writing possesses a number of positive characteristics that are worthy of note.

First, this method is highly flexible and can be adapted to a variety of student needs. More advanced students might be able to skip one or more of the steps while slower students might need recycling through some of the steps more than once. This method is also flexible in that it can be used with virtually every type of writing instruction. For example, it can be used easily to teach about all types of letters and reports as well as about specific writing qualities such as coherence, writing order, sentence structure, style, etc.

Second, with this method students are kept constantly involved. In seven of the ten steps students are having direct, active participation. The eighth step provides probably the most beneficial student involvement of all. No doubt you have heard it said, "If you want to learn something, teach it." In effect, this is exactly what is happening in Step 8. As John tries to convince Mary that such and such is wrong with

the paper they are evaluating, he is going to have to defend his stand and explain why he feels the way he does.

Third, writing factors, identified on the evaluation form, are continually before the students thereby encouraging the students to write and critique their own letter in light of these factors.

Fourth, meaningful repetition is built into a simple-to-complex order of information presentation and learning transfer. The student begins at the rote memory level and progresses through a series of steps culminating in the evaluation of other students' writing. In all but the ninth step in this method the student has repeated contact with the concepts being taught.

Fifth, examples of both good and poor writing are continually before the students thereby increasing their ability to discriminate between good and poor writing. As students evaluate two of their peers, they see at least two other ways of attacking a single writing problem. Comments that are heard during the peer evaluation sessions take the form of "I wish I had written mine this way" or "He really bombed out on this one." Students quickly realize that there is not just one way to write, but they also learn that writing which exhibits correct writing principles is far easier to read than that which does not.

Sixth, variety is built into this method. During a single trip up the spiral method, the students are involved in reading, answering, discussing, teaching, writing, analyzing, evaluating, and editing.

Finally, the spiral method produces results. Although all students are not "A" grade writers when they leave the course, they do experience solid improvement as a result of their learning experience.

Students in two report writing classes at Brigham Young University experienced the following improvement during a semester in which they were taught by the spiral method.

Assignment Number	Average grade
1	2.40
2	2.63
3	2.66
4	2.80
5	3.13

Ideally, it is desirable to see even more progress during a given semester, but an average improvement of .73 on a 4.0 scale is at least a significant change in the right direction.

Summary

Most educators would probably agree that there is no best way to teach business writing. Students enter a class with such diverse interests, needs, and intellectual levels that the teacher must develop a flexible, thorough, and rigorous methodology to meet these many needs. The spiral method is one such method.

Reference Cited

Bloom, Benjamin S., et. al. Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, Handbook I: Cognitive Domain. New York: David McKay Co., 1956.